

The Magic Number

Taken From

**You Can't Fly
with
a Broken Wing**

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The Magic Number: Seventy Times Seven

DURING A VISIT TO Yellowstone Park one writer observed that the only animal that the grizzly bear would share his food with was a skunk. It wasn't that the grizzly wanted to share his food but rather that he chose to. With one swing of his powerful paw he could have crushed the skunk.

I noticed a similar thing with humming birds at the feeder I used to have hanging on my patio. Tiny wasps took a liking to this feeder too, and I was rather amused at how these tiny creatures aggressively chased the humming birds away. The birds seemed rather aggravated but I never saw any of them try to chase the wasps away. They knew to leave them well alone.

So why did the bear allow the skunk to eat with him, and why do humming birds allow wasps to take over what is rightfully theirs?

Because they knew the high cost of getting even. Undoubtedly they've learned the hard way. Strange that we humans aren't as smart. Too often when we've been hurt, we

want to get even. Sometimes we carry grudges for years, often repressing them from conscious memory, and end up hurting ourselves more than the ones we would like to get even with. We fail to see how damaging an unforgiving spirit can be, which brings us to our third principle for healing, the law of forgiveness.

Law three: The law of forgiveness

Nursing a long-standing grudge is not only a block to healing, it is a cause of sickness, whereas forgiveness is a healing agent. In failing to forgive someone who has hurt me, I can literally make myself sick. As another has said, "Failing to forgive is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die."

▲ *Whom do we forgive?*

Acclaimed motivational speaker, Brian Tracy, says that fifty percent of the adult population is still nursing unresolved anger and resentment towards their parents. If we are to find healing, not only physical, but also emotional and spiritual, it is critical to face and resolve our anger towards our parents and forgive them—and, as Tracy says, the other person we need to forgive is everybody else.

If we don't, we will pay a high price. I read about one astonished patient who was told by his doctor: "If you don't cut out your resentments, I may have to cut out a part of your intestinal tract."

Fortunately the man took the doctor's advice. He had been nursing a bitter grudge against a former business partner. He went to see this man, resolved their differences, and forgave him. When he returned to the doctor, his physical condition had cleared up.

Interestingly, medical science is finally catching up with

what Jesus taught two thousand years ago and what the Old Testament part of the Bible taught three thousand years ago—that emotions such as fear, anxiety, worry, envy, jealousy, resentment, anger, and hatred are responsible for either causing or greatly aggravating many of our sicknesses, for damaging our relationships, and for holding us back in life.

▲ *Forgive to be forgiven*

Jesus pointed out another disturbing truth about an unforgiving spirit when he said, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."¹ Again Jesus said, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."² "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."³

Judgment is best left to God. That's his responsibility. He is the only one in a position to do so fairly and justly. I believe what Christ meant was that an unforgiving spirit on our part is a sure sign that we haven't truly shown remorse to God for all our failures nor experienced fully his forgiveness.

Some of us may need to first experience God's forgiveness before we can truly forgive another because our own sense of self-righteousness or self-justification causes us to see another's faults without seeing our own. On the other hand, others may need to forgive someone who has hurt them before they are able to experience God's forgiveness. Whatever we need to do first may depend on our particular circumstances and perhaps our personality. The important thing to realize is that there are four aspects of forgiveness needed:

First, I need to seek forgiveness for myself for where I have hurt others.

Second, I need to forgive all who have hurt me.

Third, I need to understand that forgiveness is more often than not a process rather than a single event.

Fourth, I need to experience God's forgiveness for my sins and failures.

Forgiveness for where I have hurt others

Three of the hardest sentences to say in the English language are three of the shortest. Without the willingness to say these three sentences, and genuinely mean them, one's relationships will probably be a disaster and his physical health not much better. These words take only a few seconds to say but have the power to heal, the power to keep love alive, and the power to transform a life.

They are: "I am sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me."

As already pointed out, unresolved guilt for the things we have done wrong, and for how we have hurt others, can be just as damaging in the long run to one's health and well-being as unresolved anger is towards others who have hurt us. The truth is that while most of us have been hurt at some time or another by someone close to us, many, if not most of us, have also done our share of hurting and need forgiveness not only from God but from those we have hurt.

Jesus himself stressed the importance of putting things right with an offended brother or friend when he said, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled [apologize to] to your brother; then come and offer your gift [to God]."⁴

There's no guarantee that our offended brother will forgive us, but we are to apologize, make amends, and seek his forgiveness wherever possible.

Forgiveness of others who have hurt us

It makes sense that if I want to receive forgiveness from those whom I have hurt, I need to be willing to forgive those who have hurt me. This can be extremely difficult if we have been hurt deeply. But it is possible.

▲ *Seventy times seven*

When Jesus encouraged us to "forgive seventy-times seven,"⁵ he was thinking of our physical as much as our spiritual well-being. As Dr. McMillen says, he knew that a forgiving spirit would save us from "ulcerative colitis, toxic goiters, high blood pressure, and scores of other diseases"⁶ which would include ulcers, asthma, arthritis, and heart ailments.

Jesus also said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."⁷

This doesn't mean that we let people walk over us and deliberately hurt us. Not at all. Proverbs says, "A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it."⁸ If people insist on hurting us and taking their anger out on us and are not repentant, we need to distance or separate ourselves from them. Nowhere does it say that we are to allow toxic people to dump their poison on us. Even then, if we do separate from toxic people, for our own sake we need to forgive them.

▲ *We don't have to like everybody*

Fortunately, God hasn't commanded us to like everybody. That would be impossible. But we are commanded to love people. Among other things this, at times, will mean tough love; that is, we do the most loving thing for others—keeping

in mind that it is not loving to allow others to disrespect our boundaries and walk over us. The most loving thing we can do to "boundary-busters" is to not allow them to treat us in an unkind or unloving way even if this means we need to separate from them. The reality of life is that we can't trust everybody to be loving and kind or not to be mean and cruel.

Jesus didn't trust himself to everybody either, even those who wanted to follow him because of the miracles he did. John wrote, "But Jesus didn't trust them, for he knew mankind to the core. No one needed to tell him how changeable human nature is!"⁹

Confrontation is needed for boundary-busters. But even for these it is important that we don't hold a grudge against them. If we do, we end up hurting ourselves more than we hurt them.

"The advice of the Great Physician appears to have percolated even into the hard-boiled bulletin of one police department: 'If selfish people try to take advantage of you, cross them off your list, but don't try to get even. When you try to get even, you hurt yourself more than you hurt the other fellow.'"¹⁰

▲ *Free from the past*

In an article some time ago in *Time* magazine inspired by Pope John Paul's forgiveness of his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, journalist Lance Morrow says that "the psychological case for forgiveness is overwhelmingly persuasive. Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past, by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business.

"Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another's control. If one does not forgive, then one is controlled by the other's initiatives and is locked into a sequence of act and response, of outrage and revenge, tit for tat, escalating always. The present is endlessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past."¹¹

▲ *A wall of resentment*

Furthermore, an unforgiving attitude is destructive to personal relationships. Sad to say, far too many close relationships, especially marriage and family relationships, are destroyed not so much by what has been done but by what hasn't been done—forgiving one another.

Whenever I fail to forgive my brother, a wall of resentment builds up between us and eventually we become estranged. But once I forgive him for his offense towards me, we can become close again and feelings of love are restored. At least I have done my part in bridging the gap between us in order to become close again. I can't change his attitude, but my forgiving attitude opens the door for him to respond in like manner and makes it easier for him should he choose to so do.

Forgiveness, however, needs to be genuine and not just a religious or sentimental act because it is "the right thing to do." If our forgiveness isn't genuine, resentment will poke its ugly head out at the most unexpected times—like when a couple get into an argument and drag up events from five, ten, and even fifteen years ago that they still feel resentful about. Obviously those things haven't been forgiven. Forgiveness may not forget the past but it lets go of it. Whatever hurts we fail to resolve—be it from yesterday or all the way back to early childhood—we bring into our present relationships and will either hurt, contaminate, or destroy these relationships.

Third: Forgiveness is a process

Forgiveness, however, doesn't happen overnight. It is a process. As already stated, a broken bone can heal in six weeks. Deeply hurt feelings usually take much longer to heal. The following steps are a vital part of the forgiveness process:

▲ *Admission*

"This just couldn't happen to me. It isn't real. It's all a nightmare. Everything will be fine in the morning," is a common and normal response to tragic and painful events. However, the sooner reality is faced the sooner one can begin to forgive and heal.

For years Joan refused to face the reality of her situation. She had been married for twenty-seven years when she finally walked out. It had been painful to admit that John no longer loved her. For years she excused his verbal abuse and physical violence by telling herself he won't do this again. "It must be my fault. I haven't been a good enough wife."

Joan had been hurt deeply but had refused to admit even to herself what John was doing to her. Her denial was slowly destroying her health and believing his lies was decimating her sense of self-worth. She had every right to be hurt and angry but instead of admitting it, she denied it and turned it underground.

Only when we admit we have been hurt, can we move towards forgiveness and resolution. Only the truth will set us free.

▲ *Confrontation*

According to author and counselor, Jeenie Gordon, a person cannot "heal or forgive until he has confronted the person who brought about the pain.

"When I was a passive person," Jeenie said, "I swallowed anger and pretended everything was okay. The dishonesty sent the pain underground, but eventually, anger erupted. It came oozing out in snide remarks, criticism, and sarcasm. From that dark pit, forgiveness cannot come."¹²

I have found the same principle to be true in my own experience. If I feel that a person who is important to me has done something to hurt my feelings, the sooner I confront him

or her, the better I feel. I never find this easy, but as long as I nurse my hurt and anger, the more it builds a wall between us. Closeness cannot be maintained whenever I deny my hurt or when I refuse to be honest with my feelings. This doesn't mean that we attack the other person or necessarily blame him or her for our feelings. It means we need to tell them how we feel using "I" statements rather than "you" statements.

For example, "I feel angry and/or hurt about such and such and need to talk it over with you. I may be overreacting but I didn't appreciate what you did."

To resolve our hurt and anger, we need to be totally honest and admit exactly how we feel. Then we need to get these feelings off our chest—not by lashing out and hurting the other person, but by "speaking the truth in love,"¹³ or by writing out our feelings until they are completely dissipated.

In situations where it is either impossible or unwise to confront a particular person, one can write to this person and ventilate his feelings—and then tear up the letter. If you do write out your feelings to such and such a person and feel you need to send the letter, I strongly urge that you never ... never ... never send the first draft. To get feelings out may take several drafts. Mailed letters need to be very carefully written and the truth always "spoken" in love.

To forgive another is not to ignore justice. Pope John Paul forgave his would-be assassin, but the man stayed in prison, and rightly so. And where we want others to forgive us, if we are genuine, we will want to do all in our power to make a just restitution. To oversimplify it, if I stole my neighbor's lawnmower, it isn't enough to admit to him that I stole his lawnmower and ask for his forgiveness. I need to return his lawnmower in at least as good a condition (preferably in better condition) as it was when I stole it.

▲ *Choice*

Being realistic, it's one thing to forgive those who have hurt us if they say they are sorry, but what if, when we have confronted them, they won't admit they have hurt us or don't even feel they have wronged us? It's even harder if they don't care that they have hurt us or have hurt us on purpose. How can we forgive these people?

According to one author, Susan Jacoby, we can't. She feels that "real forgiveness cannot take place without an acknowledgment of wrongdoing on the part of the person who is chiefly responsible for causing pain."¹⁴

If this is so, some of us are going to carry grudges for a long time. For example, Jim is one man who, if he waits for his daughter to come to him to say she is sorry, may never resolve his hurt and anger. His daughter, now an adult, has rejected him since he and her mother separated when she was a child. He has made many efforts to resolve their relationship but all to no avail. She's still blaming him for her parents' divorce even though her mother was involved with another man at the time, and she was the one who walked out on her father.

Jim's feelings of hurt and anger are understandable, but as long as he holds on to them, his daughter still has a hold on him. Not only are his hurt and angry feelings keeping him miserable, but they contaminate every other close relationship he has. Unless he resolves his feelings and forgives his daughter, they will keep him miserable and may ruin his health. Chances are, though there's no guarantee, forgiving his daughter could pave the way for her return. It would certainly make it easier for her.

True, when a person acknowledges his wrongdoing, it makes forgiveness much easier. But when he doesn't—which is often the case—forgiveness still becomes a choice.

▲ *Reconciliation*

Forgiveness and reconciliation are two different things. We are required to forgive but reconciliation isn't always possible. If we want to be reconciled to the person who hurt us, the same desire and mutual response on their part is needed. They too need to acknowledge what they have done and seek our forgiveness. This is always the ideal but it often doesn't work that way.

Fortunately, reconciliation isn't needed for our healing. Only forgiveness on our part is. Neither are we required to forget. What we need to do is to make reconciliation our goal and always strive to do our best to achieve this goal, but forgive regardless of the other's response.

▲ *Letting go*

It is essential to realize that forgiveness is impossible until we resolve and let go of the resentment we hold towards the one who has wronged us. Resentment is a mixture of hurt and anger and unless we resolve these negative emotions, we will continue to carry a grudge towards the one who hurt us. Therefore, to truly forgive, we need to resolve our hurt and anger.

Unless we do this, even though we say we have forgiven the offending party, there is a danger in repressing these emotions where, in the long run, they will harm our health, deaden our joy, and adversely affect all our present and future relationships. We cannot put forgiveness on top of unresolved hurt and anger. That would be like putting a Band-Aid over an infected sore without cleaning out the impurities in the sore. It's these unresolved negative emotions that stop our truly forgiving and letting go of our past hurts. Once the negative emotions are resolved, forgiveness is not only made possible, but becomes relatively simple if one chooses to forgive.

▲ Time

How long does it take to resolve these negative feelings? Until they have all gone; that is, until we aren't crying or angry anymore over what happened to us.

Only then can we let go of the past and be freed to forgive and get on with our lives, unencumbered by past hurtful experiences. However, it has been said that time heals all wounds. Unfortunately, this isn't so. Some people have been stuck in their resentment for years because they have never worked through the healing process. It's the process that takes time. Healing is the result of the process.

I have read that after a divorce, for instance, it can take one year of recovery for every five years a person was married. I can't verify this, but "Statistics remind us that eighty-five percent of divorced men and seventy-six percent of divorced women marry within fourteen months of their divorce. Those who marry within twelve months or sooner have a seventy percent chance of being divorced again! Even those who wait longer have a fifty-five percent chance of being divorced again."¹⁵

Whatever the cause of the pain, give yourself time to work through the healing process and to heal. Generally speaking, the greater the loss and pain, the greater amount of time it takes to heal. Whatever you do, don't look to romance to heal your wounds for that will be just another Band-Aid to cover your pain.

In fact, if every person resolved his/her personal issues before they were married, divorce statistics would diminish dramatically. Failing to do this is one of the major causes of marital and relational failure. This is because each partner brings his and her unresolved baggage from the past into every relationship.

Fourth: Forgiveness from God

To find complete healing, spiritual as well as emotional,

and peace of mind, we not only need to forgive all who have hurt us, but we also need to experience God's forgiveness.

There isn't a person alive who doesn't have some sins, faults and wrongdoing to confess and resolve, and who doesn't need God's forgiveness. As God's Word says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."¹⁶

When God forgives us, he doesn't overlook his divine justice, but does so on the basis of his divine love. His justice requires a just sentence, which is spiritual or eternal death—which is being separated forever from God, the author of all love and life. But herein is the love of God expressed—in that he paid the price to meet the demands of his justice when he gave his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die on the cross in our place as the just retribution for our sins and wrongs. Therefore, God can freely forgive us and not in any way violate his divine justice. When we confess our sins to him, he grants us a complete pardon for all we have ever done wrong.

The important thing is that we respond to God's love by first acknowledging our sin and wrongdoing and asking for his forgiveness, and then accepting his pardon. His Word says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."¹⁷

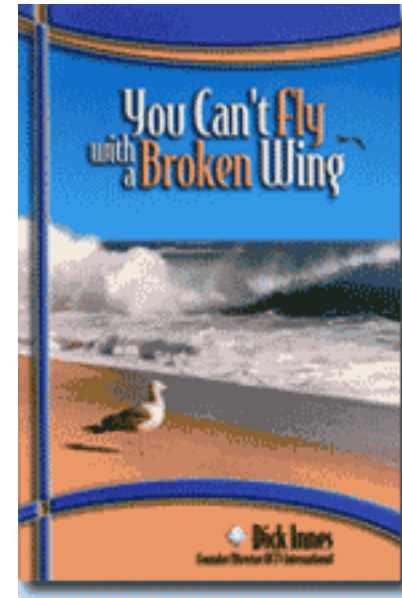
And then, in appreciation to God for his forgiveness of us, let us freely forgive others as we ourselves have been so freely forgiven. "Therefore, as God's chosen people ... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."¹⁸

Forgiveness frees both the one who forgives and the one who has been forgiven (providing he/she accepts it). Forgiving and forgiveness are central and foundational for healing—physical, emotional, and spiritual. Modern psycholo-

gy agrees and is now emphasizing this crucial fact that the Bible taught three thousand years ago.

Footnotes:

1. Matthew 6:14-15, (NIV).
2. Mark 11:25, (NIV).
3. Romans 12:19, (NIV).
4. Matthew 5:23-24, (NIV).
5. Matthew 18:22
6. Dr. S.I.McMillen, *None of These Diseases* (Westwood, New Jersey: Spire Books, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1963), 71.
7. Luke 17:3-4, (NIV).
8. Proverbs 22:3, (NIV).
9. John 2:24-25, (TLB).
10. McMillen, *None of These Diseases*, 71.
11. *Time*, January 9, 1984.
12. Jeenie Gordon, *Cementing the Torn Strands* (Tarrytown, New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1991), 93.
13. Ephesians 4:15.
14. *McCall's* magazine, October 1983.
15. Dick Innes, *How to Mend a Broken Heart* (Arcadia, California: ACTS Communications, 1999), 55-56.
16. 1 John 1:8, (NIV).
17. 1 John 1:9, (NIV).
18. Colossians 3:12-13, (NIV).



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